Book Review: David Lee Independent television production in the UK

Lee, David.

Independent Television Production in the UK: from Cottage Industry to Big Business

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It always feels peculiar to read about an industry in which you once worked: in the late 1990s, I was fresh out of university and started off my career as a freelance researcher and runner at independent TV production companies. I was a bright, idealistic and ambitious: keen to become a 'creative' individual, freed from the dreary grind of office working hours, and the chauvinistic, industrial trade unions I had grown up with in the 1970s. But I quickly realised that this individualistic life of freewheeling creativity was not all it was cracked up to be.

I was 'free' to rack up debt, working for months on unpaid internships. I was 'free' to have my programme ideas and research stolen by unscrupulous producers, operating under the guise of networking with promising new talent. Finally, I was 'free' to work insanely long hours, until a near-fatal accident with heavy machinery on set made me realise how dangerous that could be. I didn't possess the trust fund I would have needed to keep me going, and I didn't possess a death wish either, so I left.

Having read Lee's excellent and wide-ranging analysis of the independent TV production industry, I am glad I did. It is divided into three sections: the first of which provides an admirably clear and detailed overview of the history of independent TV production in the United Kingdom: paying careful attention to the complex political, economic, legal and social factors shaping the industry over the last few decades. These factors include audience fragmentation, falling advertising revenues, successive governments, deregulation, and the mass commercialisation and globalisation of the media industry. In this way, Lee explains how and why a plethora of tiny, vibrant 'indies' became the subsidiaries of multinational giants like Viacom.

But it is in the second section of the book that the book really sings. Here, Lee illuminates the impact of these changes upon the industry's heavily casualized, precarious workforce, at the same time as attending to changes in these actors' own lives. This discussion is enabled by an unusual longitudinal approach. Lee first interviewed independent TV production workers in 2006, during the optimistic 'Cool Britannia' New Labour era, and then returned to them ten years later, under a right-wing Conservative government. In order to discuss this rare data set, Lee draws upon a wealth of theory about labour/work in the creative industries, bringing it to bear on broader ideas about self-entrepreneurship, self-reflexivity and liquid modernity.

But it is the way in which Lee makes these powerful and often poignant interviews speak to the questions of "good work" first raised by David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, which sticks most in my mind. In particular, he highlights respondents' frustration at how difficult it has become to 'sell' socially meaningful work in a commercialized environment which prizes gimmicky populism. But he also gives voice to workers who have found that emotional anxiety, a long hours culture and job insecurity builds up over time to produce 'burn out' and mental ill health. Finally, Lee demonstrates a critical alertness to the ways in which caring responsibilities make endless mobility and precarity deeply unattractive, and indeed unworkable, for producers.

This leads Lee into the discussion of the lack of diversity in the industry: arguing that the changing political economy and harsh working conditions of independent TV production shape the systematic privileging of white men of considerable socio-economic means - even without any blatant discrimination occurring. This is because it is these individuals who possess the cultural and social capital necessary to cope within an industry which is heavily dependent on unpaid labour, and extensive on and off-line networks.

In his third and final section, Lee expands on the seeming contradiction between the cultural value which producers place on the production of independent factual television in principle, and their critique of common production practices. In particular, Lee highlights how difficult it now is for producers to create the kinds of one off, socially engaged TV documentaries which they value, since most work opportunities involve creating popular formats. These formats must not only speak to UK audiences, but to audiences around the world, as well as having the potential to generate different streams of commercial revenue for the multinational parents which now own these 'independent' companies.

Thus Lee's work constitutes a wide-ranging, well-informed and impassioned call for a more moral economy of independent television production: one which makes possible the restitution of culturally valuable programming, and the well-being of media producers, through a re-examination of underpinning political and economic structures. If we want public service content, he suggests, we cannot leave this to the forces of the market, or to individuals' good intentions. In so arguing, Lee makes a vital contribution to broader debates about freelancing, media ownership, and normative evaluation within journalism studies, whilst also speaking to arguments about socio-economic injustice in the cultural and creative industries.